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PARIS FOR ZEYA, LONDON FOR TSOU

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TAGS: PREL PGOV KPAL LE IR SY
SUBJECT: SYRIAN FOREIGN POLICIES PAYING OFF, SAYS REGIME
INSIDER

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Stephen A. Seche for reasons 1.4 b/d

¶1. (C) Summary: Longtime Embassy contact and regime insider Imad Shuebi asserted that the SARG is feeling confident in its standoff with the U.S. and is looking ahead with renewed assurance. Syria has correctly played its foreign policy cards on Lebanon, Hamas and Iran, and is reaping the benefits, Shuebi stated. Shuebi tends to interpret most of Syria's foreign policy moves as signals to U.S. policy makers for dialogue and compromise with Syria on regional goals. That being said, Shuebi's view that the SARG has played its foreign policy cards well has been repeated recently by other contacts in Syria. End Summary.

¶2. (C) Longtime Embassy contact and regime insider Imad Shuebi told us March 1 that the SARG is riding high in its standoff with the U.S. and that it will not return to the low levels of confidence it experienced in 2005. Syria had correctly played most of its foreign policy cards and was reaping the benefits, Shuebi asserted.

¶3. (C) LEBANON: Syria does not see its influence in Lebanon ever reverting back to the pre-Lebanese civil war days when the SARG was weak and when external powers such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Libya felt free to intervene in internal Lebanese affairs, Shuebi stated. Syria is now the most essential of Lebanon's "three lungs," which also include the border with Israel and the sea route to the West.

¶4. (C) When asked about newspaper reports of efforts to remove Emile Lahoud from the Presidency, Shuebi noted that if the U.S. and others want to change the Lebanese president, they must compromise with the SARG and recognize Syria's strong influence there. The March 14 forces will not succeed at replacing Lahoud without Syrian consent, said Shuebi, adding that the SARG would only accept a few names as potential Lahoud replacements. The SARG previously had reservations about former FM Jean Obeid but would probably find him acceptable now, Shuebi claimed. The SARG might also accept Michel Aoun as President, noted Shuebi without elaboration. Nassib Lahoud would not be acceptable because of his Sunni wife, whose sister is related by marriage to Saudi King Abdullah and whose relatives have ties to Rifat al-Asad.

¶5. (C) HAMAS: Syria's long-time support for the Damascus-based Palestinian rejectionist groups had paid off with Hamas' victory in the Palestinian Legislative elections, Shuebi said. The presence of Hamas leader Khalid Mish'al in Damascus meant that anyone wanting to deal with Hamas would also have to deal with Syria, Shuebi claimed. The SARG exerted important influence on Hamas, asserted Shuebi, adding

that Syria's FM Walid Muallim advised Mish'al in their February 27 meeting to be "hard but flexible -- like Syria" when dealing with the West.

¶ 16. (C) Over the past five years, Mish'al had moved from purely ideological stances, which included a complete rejection of Israel's existence, toward more pragmatic views that would eventually include recognition of Israel, Shuebi predicted. In the immediate future, the Hamas leadership would recognize past agreements as part of the logic of running a government, he added. The renunciation of violence would take much longer, as Hamas considers its actions as "resistance" and because Israel also employs violence against the Palestinians. (Note: Shuebi didn't indicate Hamas flexibility on this issue as he had on the recognition of Israel and past agreements.)

¶ 17. (C) IRAN: The SARG has sought to raise the profile of its relationship with Iran to signal the U.S. that Syria can either play a moderating influence on Iran in favor of the West or take a hard-line position detrimental to U.S. regional goals.

¶ 18. (C) Comment: As he spoke, Shuebi made frequent, vague references to his ties with key SARG decision-makers, including with the Syrian President. He tended to interpret most of Syria's foreign policy moves as signals to U.S. policy makers, presumably to make the case for U.S. dialogue and compromise with Syria on regional goals. He asked at the end whether there was any change in U.S. policy toward Syria that would offer promise of dialogue and engagement, to which Polchief responded in the negative. Shuebi's view that the SARG has played its foreign policy cards well has been repeated recently by other contacts in Syria.

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